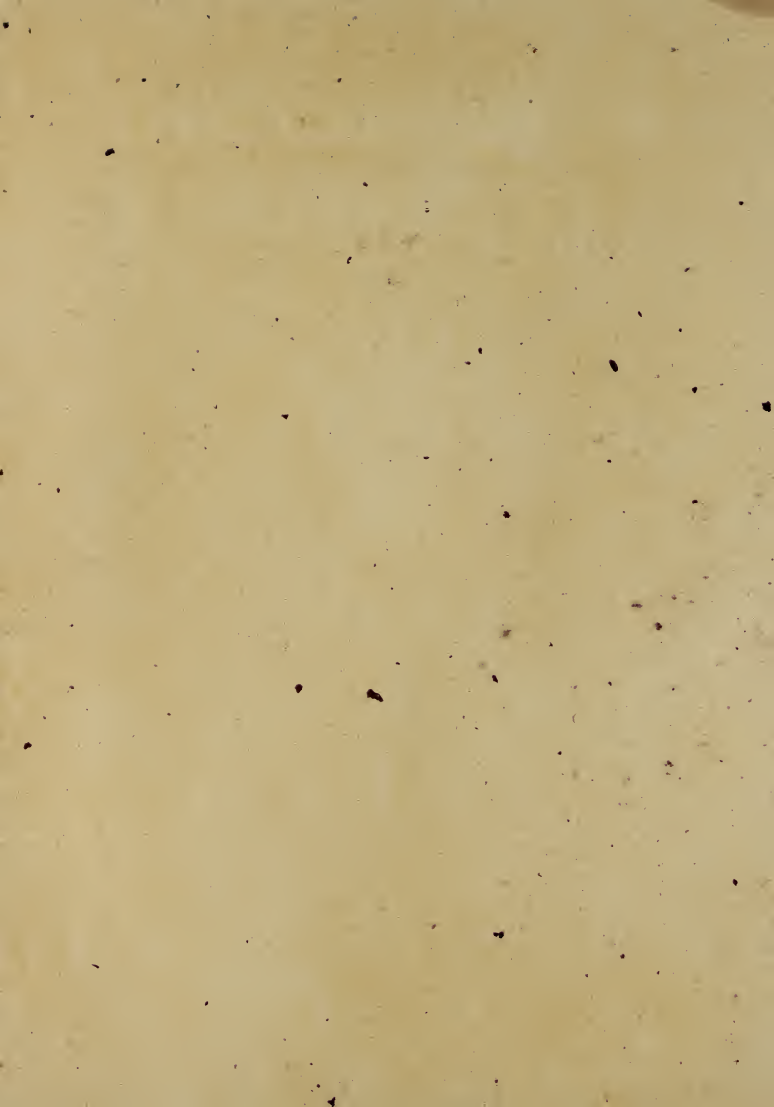
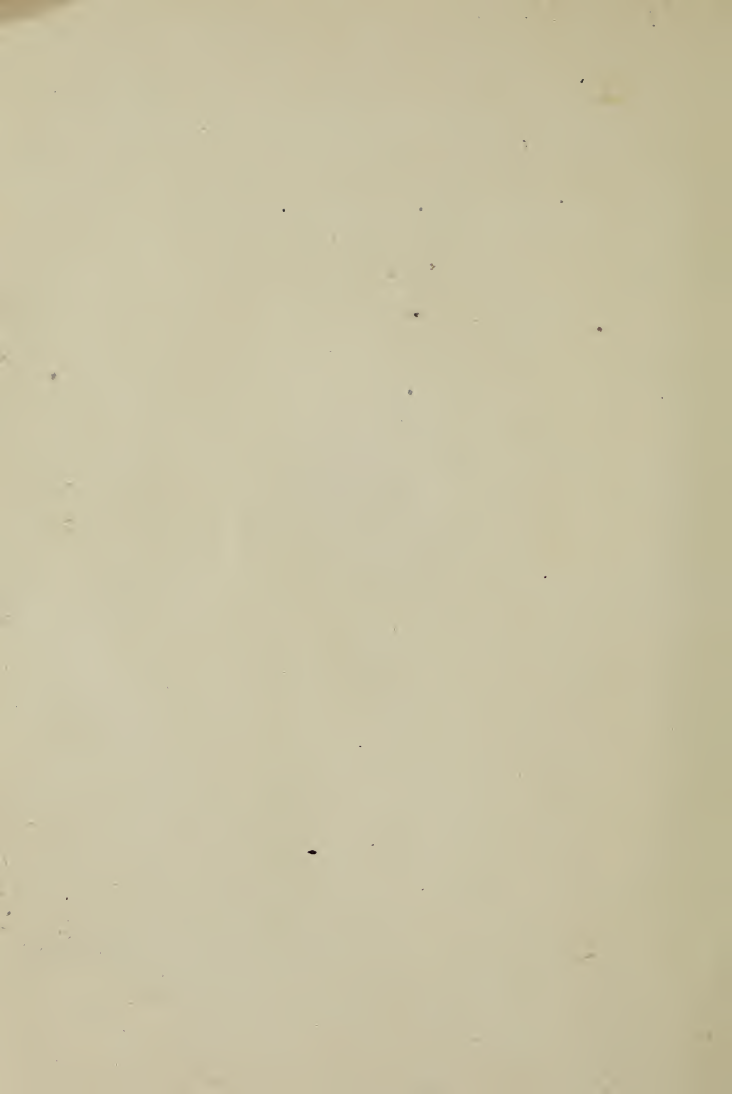


THE CHARM OF ROSSETTI

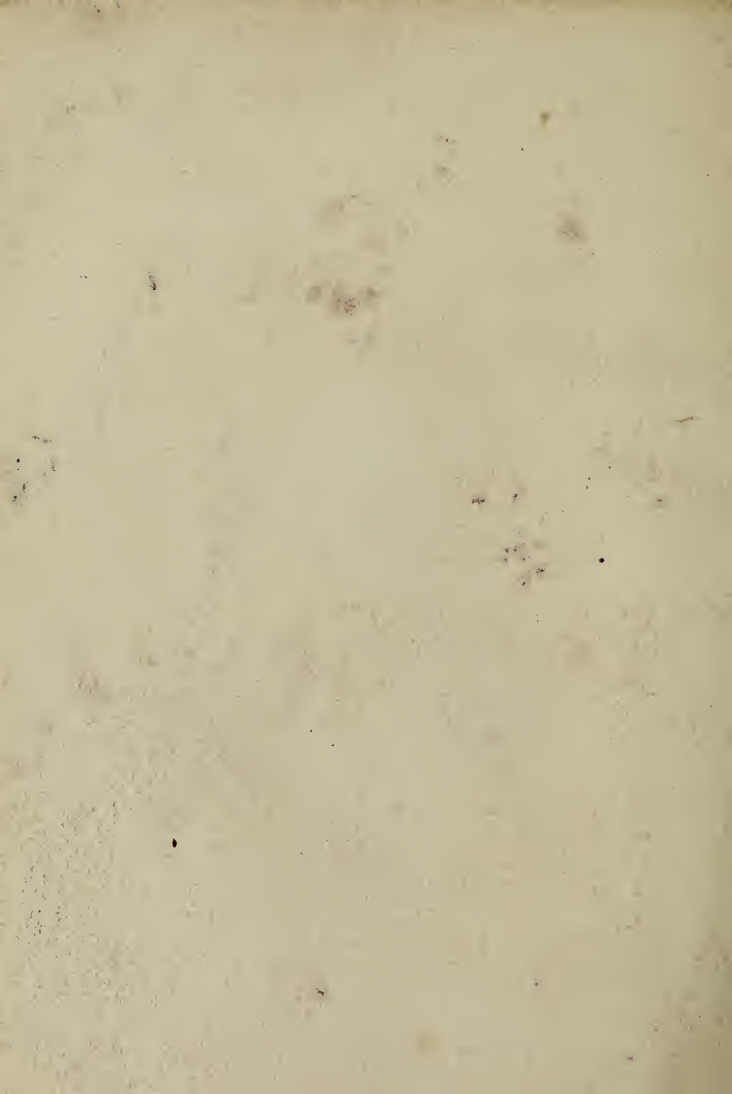






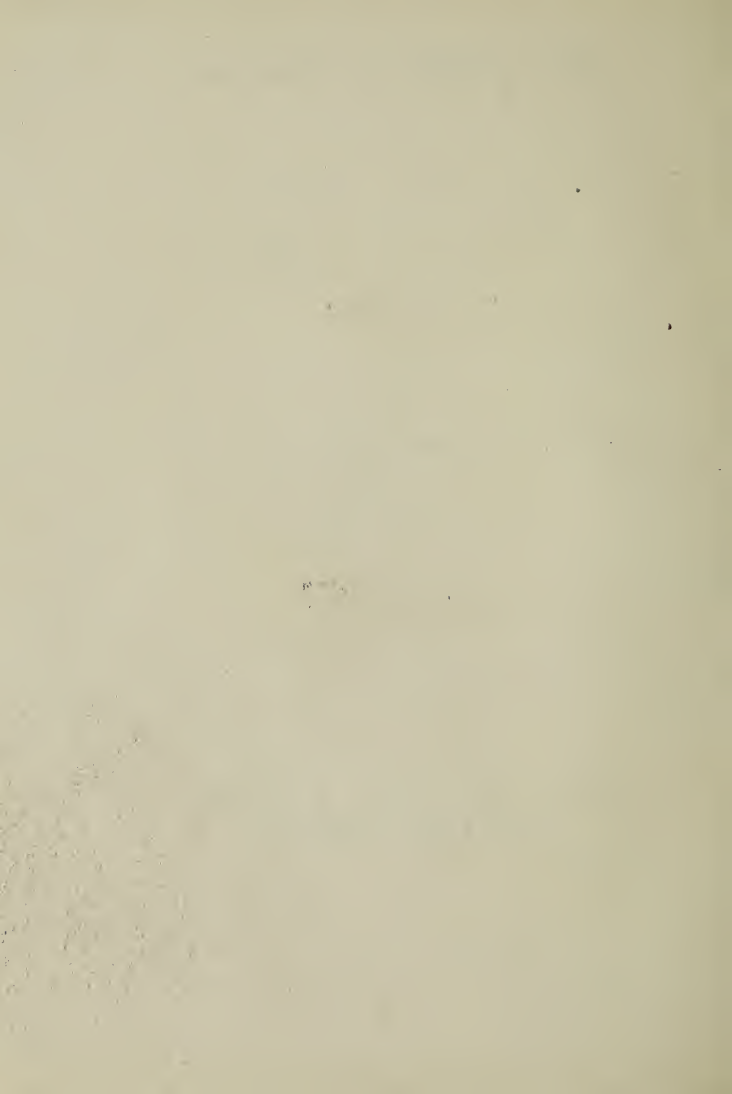






The Charm of Rossetti

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The Day Dream

(*Oil Painting. South Kensington. Ionides
Collection*)

This arresting picture, for which Mrs William Morris sat, was for nearly twelve years in the artist's studio awaiting completion. The colour is not quite in Rossetti's normal key, but the painting of the figure and the arrangement of the drapery are finely skilled, while the face, with slightly strumous lips and curious aloofness from thought, is typical of the artist's choice.





**THE CHARM
OF
ROSSETTI**

By S. L. BENSUSAN

C.W.

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The Charm of Rossetti

A FOREWORD

AMONG the men whose charm defies definition Dante Gabriel Rossetti takes a prominent place. He appeals to people of most diverse temperaments, but few would be in entire agreement on the question of the direct source of his attraction. As it is with those who know him only by his work in art and poetry, so it is with his contemporaries, of whom the greater part have passed. They could not tell how it was that this strong man held strong men captive, did with them as seemed good to him, ruling their lives and influencing their art without resentment on their part or effort on his own. *A Foreword.*

When we turn to consider Rossetti as a

The Charm of

*A Fore-
word.* painter the extraordinary literary quality of his art reminds us that he used the pen as freely as he used the brush. When we turn to consider him as a poet the pictorial quality of his verse serves as a reminder that the brush was as familiar a medium as the pen. We know on the authority of William Michael Rossetti that his greatly gifted brother thought of himself as a poet rather than a painter, and it may be that the secret of his fascination lies in the truth that he was first and foremost a mystic, deeply imbued with the love of beauty, profoundly intolerant of the ugliness around him. Living mentally in a world of his own creation he admitted to the charmed circle very few even among those who claimed him for a friend. That he should appeal to the Anglo-Saxon is the more strange because by blood, as well as in the trend of his thought, he was almost a pure Latin.

Rossetti

Ruskin has called him a great Italian *A Fore-*
tormented in the Inferno of London, and *word.*
this seems to be the truth though it does not
go far enough. He has the spirit of rena-
scent Tuscany. He might have lived in
Florence with Dante or taken his place in
the charmed circle of Lorenzo the Magnifi-
cent. Certainly, he could have claimed more
affinity with fifteenth century Italy than he
had with nineteenth century England, and
we may never hope to know the full extent
to which sunless skies and a winter extending
over more than half the year were re-
sponsible for the failure of such promise as
few young men succeed in making. How
much he achieved let Ruskin tell us, who
wrote: "I believe that Rossetti's name should
be placed first on the list of men within my
own range of knowledge who have raised
and changed the spirit of modern art; raised
it in absolute attainment, changed in direction

The Charm of Rossetti

A Fore- of temper.” Ruskin is referring here, of
word. course, to the Pre-Raphaelite movement of which Rossetti was a pioneer and which was, in fact, an English revival of the schools of painting that preceded Raphael. It was excellent as a revolt, but it failed, as Ruskin himself saw that it must fail, because it did no more than graft modern thought and emotion upon mediæval stock. Ruskin said of the art movement, with which Rossetti was so closely concerned, when writing of the Pre-Raphaelite brethren, “If they adhere to their principles and paint Nature as it is around them with the help of modern science, and with the earnestness of men of the thirteenth and fourteenth century, they will, as I said, found a new and noble school in England. If their sympathies with early artists lead them into mediævalism or Romanism, they will, of course, come to nothing.” It is unnecessary at this time of day to point out

Beata Beatrix

(*Oil Painting. Tate Gallery*)

This picture was painted in 1863, a year after the painter's wife (*née* Elizabeth Siddal) had died suddenly from the effects of an overdose of laudanum. Beatrice sits entranced in a strange dress of green and purple, while a bird flies to her, bearing in his beak the white flower, symbol of death. Mysterious figures are seen in the background amid the garden trees; a sundial records the flight of time, and a vague, impalpable sense of sadness and desolation broods over the scene.





The Charm of Rossetti

that the Pre-Raphaelite movement is dead. *A Fore-
word.* But it was born in stirring times. It synchronised with a movement in France that has altered the whole aspect of modern art, not only in the country of its origin, but in England, Holland, and even in Italy itself, much to the disgust of the people with elderly or intolerant minds. And though the Pre-Raphaelites did very little good in the world, or, to be more just, did some good for a very little while, the story of their movement is full of interest, and in briefly narrating the more outstanding incidents of Rossetti's life, his association with those who founded the school, and the influence he exercised upon them, will be made clear.

CHAPTER II

HIS LIFE

His Life. ROSSETTI was born in Charlotte Street, Portland Place, in 1828, and of his baptismal names, Gabriel Charles Dante, he dropped the middle one, and transposed the first and third. It was said earlier that by blood he was almost a pure Italian, and the statement may stand, though of his four grandparents one was English. His father, who was a professor of Italian in King's College, London, had experienced many vicissitudes in Italy and was in truth in exile. His mother, to whom he was devotedly attached, was the daughter of a Tuscan physician named Polodori. Dante Gabriel Rossetti had two sisters and a brother. Of the sisters, one

The Charm of Rossetti

entered a religious house and died in 1876. *His Life.*

The other, Christina, was a truly gifted poet.

The brother was William Michael, to whom we owe so much of our knowledge of the painter-poet. The family lived in reduced circumstances, but contrived to extend a welcome to every unfortunate liberal and patriot who came from Italy. Among the most illustrious visitors were Paganini and Mazzini, and the atmosphere of the house was so highly charged with politics that young Dante Gabriel grew disgusted, and conceived a distaste for them that never left him.

From a day school in Portland Place he went to King's College in 1837 for five years. He appears to have made no friends there, and to have been a shy, shrinking lad, concentrated upon his own thoughts, and, to no small extent, oblivious of all that did not immediately concern him. Already he had decided that for choice he would be a painter,

The Charm of

His Life. and on leaving school he went for four years to a Drawing Academy, reaching the Royal Academy School in 1846. In the meantime he was writing verse. Some of it indeed was poetry. "The Blessed Damosel" was written when he was only twenty years of age, and, in 1848, the year of this poem, he approached Ford Madox Brown and asked him to accept him as a pupil. Brown, who was some seven years his senior, agreed, and a little later we find the young man associated with Millais and Holman Hunt, fellow-students at the Academy and of about his own age. The hold of poetry upon him was strengthening, and he was in some doubt about his vocation. Parental needs suggested that art must be followed because it offered a better chance of adequate remuneration, for in those days, as now, the writing of poetry was largely its own reward. Then with the autumn of 1848, when Rossetti was

Rossetti

twenty, Millais nineteen, and Holman Hunt *His Life*. twenty-one, the Pre-Raphaelite brotherhood was established. It was a revolt against the sterilising tendencies of British art, and against the conventional work that sought at most to tell some pretty story, illustrate some feeble humour, or express ideas that are associated for the greater part with those people who are wholly uneducated and mistake extremely cheap emotions for profound sentiment. So far, the project was distinctly good, in the avoidance of the popular low tones and darkened backgrounds and in the choice of a clean canvas the young men were moving undoubtedly in the right direction, along the road followed by those modern Frenchmen who have banished from the palette all save the primary colours. Unfortunately the Brethren were too much concerned with technique, and their work has been well compared to a mosaic. In the end, one could not see the

The Charm of

His Life. wood for the trees. When we remember the age of the reformers, it is hardly astonishing to find that their enthusiasm outran their capacity. They meant well, achieved something, and gave their contemporaries furiously to think.

Ford Madox Brown would not join the association, though there is some question as to whether he ever received a definite invitation to do so. But Rossetti's elder brother, William Michael, came in as secretary and press agent, and Woolner the sculptor, and F. G. Stevens the art critic, and James Collinson the painter were of the party. It passed very soon under the complete control of the masterful Dante Gabriel Rossetti, who kept all enthusiasms up to the highest pitch and stimulated the brethren not only in their art work, but in their literary interests.

While the brethren remained quite in-

Rossetti

conspicuous the powers that were did not *His Life*, trouble to correct their presumption. But as soon as the new work came prominently before the public there was a violent outcry in the Conservative press. *The Times*, for example, made a bitter attack on the young reformers in 1851. This was very unfortunate for those who shared the views of the art critics, for Ruskin came to the rescue, and the tide of popular favour started to run in the direction of the new movement. In the meantime Rossetti was turning more and more to poetry, and was, in fact, writing some of his most beautiful works, much to the alarm of his family circle who saw, or thought they saw, that if he sought to achieve a reputation in two directions he would probably fail in both. Indeed, his father put the case so strongly to him that in 1852, at the age of twenty-four, he declared he would give up poetry. Then came the

The Charm of

His Life. Germ, the curious little magazine that had so brief and unsuccessful a career. It was badly printed and unsuccessful, but full of most beautiful work, to which Rossetti contributed not a little. Only four numbers were issued.

With the year 1854 came the friendship between Rossetti and Ruskin, a union of strangely ill-assorted minds, but one that was of enormous advantage to the painter-poet, because Ruskin was a liberal buyer of his work, and his judgment was powerful enough to convince many who had doubts about its merit. In 1857 Rossetti was associated with Benjamin Woodward, the architect, Burne-Jones, the painter, and William Morris, the poet, in the decoration of the Debating Rooms of the Oxford Union Society. This undertaking was a failure, but it left William Morris and Burne-Jones at Rossetti's feet.

Rossetti

From 1860 to 1870 Rossetti was making *His Life*. great strides in his art and a great improvement in his own position. He was developing a dual mind. On the one hand he was more than ever concerned with the pursuit of beauty, and for him the highest type of revealed beauty in the world was Woman. Nature made a smaller appeal to him. It was in the year 1860 that he married Miss Siddal, whom he had known for some ten years. She was the daughter of a Sheffield tradesman, and coming to London to earn her living had found work in a bonnet shop in Leicester Square where W. H. Deverell, a young artist and friend of Rossetti, had seen and persuaded her to sit for him for a Shakespearean picture (*The Duke with Viola listening to the Court Minstrels*). Rossetti also sat for this picture, and so made the acquaintance of Elizabeth Eleanor Siddal, who was then seventeen.

The Charm of

His Life. She had very little education, but considerable natural gifts. Her personal charm was considerable, but she was a delicate girl, and traces of consumption made their appearance before she was twenty-one. As soon as Rossetti was in a position to marry, the two were united, though it is not too much to say that Miss Siddal was already under sentence of death. Within two years she was dead, and Rossetti, stricken with grief—that some of his biographers would suggest was largely associated with repentance for neglect—buried the manuscript of his poems in her grave, and then, leaving the home in Chatham Place, went to 16 Cheyne Walk, Chelsea, where he set up house with William Rossetti, Algernon Charles Swinburne, and George Meredith. Much as his friends liked Rossetti, they found him an extremely difficult person to live with, because his self-centred life made him quite oblivious to the

Rossetti

comfort of others. But when he had shaken *His Life.* off the first grief that came with his wife's death, Rossetti settled down to the closing years of a very successful career that lasted, as far as money-making went, beyond the breakdown of his health.

It is in these years between 1860 and 1870 that the dual nature of the man becomes most apparent. We see him as a dreamer of dreams and a worshipper of beauty, and yet, it must be confessed that in his private life he observed few rules of morals. We see him as the painter of beautiful pictures and the writer of beautiful poems, but we know that he could bargain like a born salesman with his clients, and that he would paint the same subject two and three times over if he thought it would be popular and sell well, and he even employed assistants to do a part of the work. He was a keen collector, one of those who instituted the modern craze for

The Charm of

His Life. old china, silver, glass, and furniture, and in purchasing these things he had all the cunning of the dealer. In pursuit of money he would go to lengths that his admirers would find it hard to justify, and, when the money was in his bank, he would give it away with both hands. It is hard indeed to render justice to this strange figure of a man. We know that he coerced and controlled some of the strongest intellects of his generation, that he could say and could do outrageous things without offending anybody he did not wish to offend, such was his extraordinary personal charm. And for all that, there was little in the outward semblance of middle life to account for any of his gifts. He was rather below, than above, the common height, and looked shorter than he was because he was distinctly stout. He dressed carelessly, and had few conventional courtesies.

It was about the year 1867 when the first

Rossetti

signs of his failing health became apparent, and *His Life*. they took the form of insomnia. His eyesight then began to fail him, and his nervous energy to decline. He sought seclusion, and began to indulge in the drug that brought his career to an end—Chloral, though it may well be that he had no precise knowledge of its dangerous possibilities. It is probably to this drug, which he began to take about 1870, that he owed the curious morbid delusion that he was the victim of a gigantic conspiracy, and that every conspirator was waiting for the opportunity to insult him. At the famous home of William Morris, Kelmscott Manor House, near Lechlade, where he was a joint tenant from 1871 to 1874, these ideas of persecution began to take very firm hold upon him, and were greatly strengthened by the attack in the *Contemporary Review*. This was the work of the late Mr Robert Buchanan, and took the

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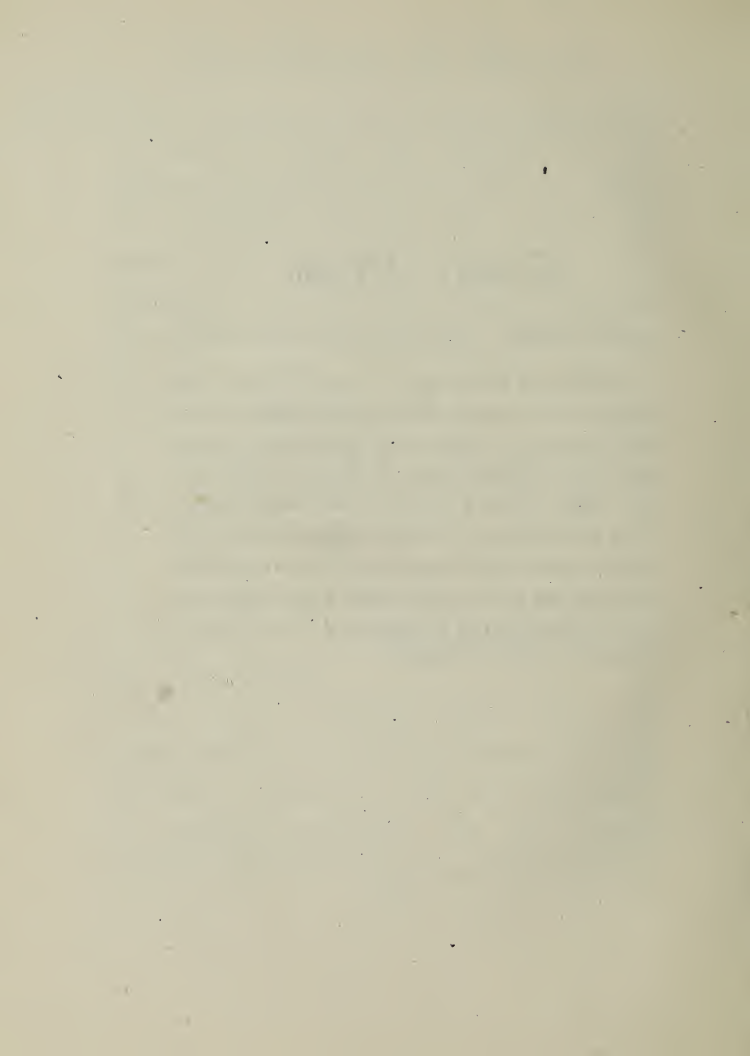
His Life. form of an article called "The Fleshly School of Poetry," which was extended in the following year and became a fiercely vindictive pamphlet. Rossetti now reached the state of mind in which he could see covert allusions to himself in the writings of his most illustrious contemporaries, and it may be said that the last fifteen years of his life, 1867 to 1882, were full of pain and trouble, largely self-inflicted. There is no suggestion of harsh criticism here : one does but state the facts of the case quite plainly. Rossetti was not the less a great man because of his private faults, nor should we be concerned with his life if it had been entirely faultless and unproductive.

It becomes necessary to set down the ascertained facts of his life, because it is only by doing so that we can read his work aright. In studying his pictures one must always remember that he was poet as well as painter,

Dante's Dream

(Oil Painting. Walker Gallery, Liverpool)

The date of this picture is 1871; it is the large version of a water-colour study painted fifteen years before. It illustrates in strangely heart-felt fashion Dante's lines in the "Vita Nuova," in which he has a vision of the dead Beatrice. The infinite detail so finely subordinated to the central theme, the harmony of line and colour, and the fine poetic vision have given this work a very high place in the regard of Rossetti's ever-widening circle of admirers.





The Charm of Rossetti

Italian more than Englishman, that his proper *His Life.* century was the fifteenth rather than the nineteenth, and that his curiously Florentine temperament was of the kind that is associated time out of mind with neurosis. He suffered intensely, and out of his sufferings, mental and physical, he has given us enduring pictures and enduring poems. How far his search for beauty succeeded in satisfying him we may hardly hope to know, but we may believe that his life, whatever its achievements, was honestly and truthfully devoted to that search, and that it was the desire to express the sense of beauty dominating him that led him to his most successful efforts in language, line and colour. So, having hinted at the troubles that came with the latter days, it is only necessary here to point out how the last years were lightened by the wholehearted devotion of Mr Hall Caine, who in those days had yet to win his spurs as a

The Charm of Rossetti

His Life. novelist, and that the end came on Easter Sunday in the year 1882, when the painter-poet had not quite completed his fifty-fourth year. He was buried in Birchington where he died, and a cross stands over his grave in spite of the fact that he was a pronounced agnostic.

CHAPTER III

HIS ART

ROSSETTI's art was intensely individual and *His Art.* shows three distinct periods. The first, a brief one, in which he was arriving ; the second, a longer one, in which he was at his best ; and the third, in which his most popular pictures were painted, or repainted, and his powers show a marked decline. There were years in which, had he persevered, Rossetti might have given the English school its renaissance, but success from the financial side, and the mode of life which seemed to demand an income of several thousands a year, were alike against him. His art declined with his mental powers. There is a long twilight in which Rossetti's pictures

The Charm of

His Art. have few of the qualities that make for the immortality which is conferred upon the great art work of all times. It is not difficult to realise that when a man begins to suffer from his eyes in 1867 and continues to paint until his death in 1882, there can be but little hope for his latter day work. The wonder is not that the change has taken place, but that it is not greater. It was a common criticism among his contemporaries that Rossetti had not learned properly to paint. But those who insist upon this must have a greater feeling for the sophistries of schools than the writer can share. It would be more fair to say that Rossetti never sacrificed his arresting individuality, that he thought out things for himself. His curious sensitiveness kept him from exhibiting his work. Most of it was painted for patrons who carried it off from the studios on completion. Representative

Rossetti

collections of his pictures have seldom been *His Art*, brought together, though the writer remembers a fine exhibition at the Guildhall in London several years ago.

In poetry we know that he had a distinct taste for certain words; in art he had a corresponding feeling for certain colours. He preferred oils to water colours and turned chiefly to the latter in order to fulfil the wishes of patrons. His taste in colours is set down, in 1865, when his gifts as a colourist were at their zenith. He wrote as follows: "Thinking in what order I love colours, I found the following:—

1. Pure, light, warm green.
2. Deep gold colour.
3. Certain tints of grey.
4. Shadowy or steel blue.
5. Brown with a crimson tinge.
6. Scarlet.

Other colours are comparatively, only lovable

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His Art. according to the relations in which they are placed."

Rossetti's greatest triumphs were those of the colourist, and his sense of colour comes out very strongly in his poems. His favourite type of woman is either founded upon Miss Siddal and Miss Burden (afterwards Mrs William Morris), or these summed up for him the actual living presence of his dreams. It is unnecessary to give the details for they are present in all the good pictures in the public collection, and are to be seen in the reproductions of privately owned pictures published in the magazines from time to time. It will be seen that they have no suggestion of modernity. They belong to an older world, whether they are of the religious kind, or belong to the Dante series, or are purely mystical like the "Beata Beatrix" reproduced here. By many of the painter-poet's admirers, "Dante's Dream" is considered to be one

Rossetti

of his greatest achievements, and illustrates *His Art*. a passage from the "Vita Nuova," in which Love brings Dante to the dead Beatrice and kisses her before him. It was a subject that had attracted the painter many years earlier, and he had painted it in water colours some fifteen years before the big canvas which now hangs in the Walker Art Gallery in Liverpool was completed. The "Day Dream," now in the Ionides collection at the South Kensington Museum—picture of a fascinating woman sitting among the lower branches of a sycamore tree—was painted from Mrs William Morris, and is one of the latest of the finished works. Rossetti had known this lady before she married. Seeing her at the theatre one night he was so greatly impressed by her beauty that he sought and obtained an introduction to her family in order that he might ask her to sit to him, and she appeared in many of his important pictures.

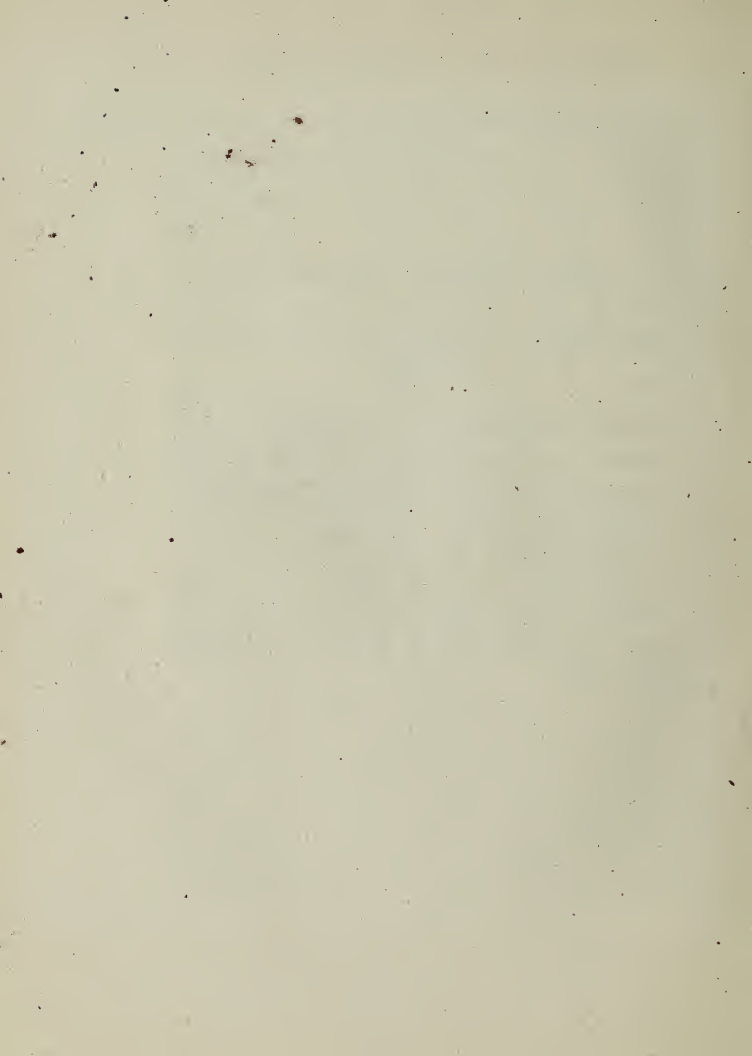
The Charm of Rossetti

His Art. The "Beata Beatrix" is purely mystical in its conception. This picture is one for which his wife sat when the preliminary sketches were made. These first pencil studies belong to the brief years of his married life, and the picture was finished after her death. Beatrice is seen at a balcony against a background of sunset light that leaves an aureole round her head in faint suggestive fashion. Her dress is of the curious green which was Rossetti's favourite colour, and has purple sleeves. A red bird bearing a poppy, the emblem of death, is about to alight upon her arm. In the background figures of Dante and of Love are looking on, while in the far distance faintly is the vague outline of some mysterious city. This subject fascinated Rossetti, and he turned to it again and again. One replica of the later years shows, in addition to the main subject, the figures of Beatrice and Dante with their attendants

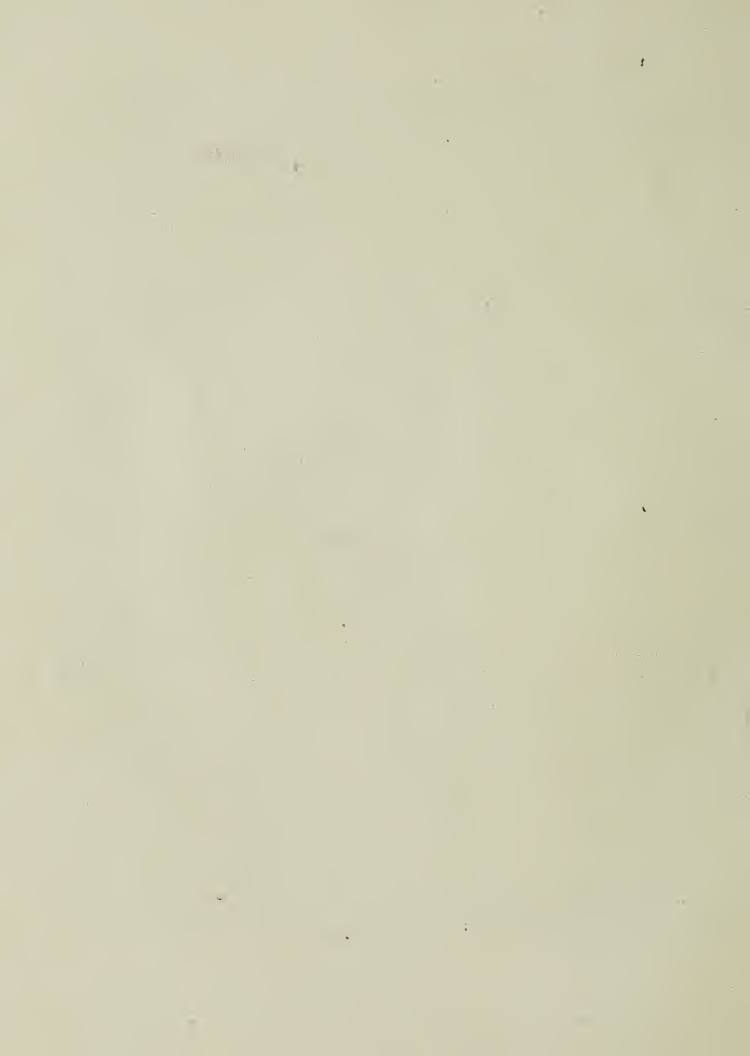
The Bower Meadow

(*Oil Painting. Collection of Sir John Milburn,
Bart.*)

This is a delightful but curious example of the painter's art, for the landscape background belongs to the days of the pre-Raphaelite movement when Rossetti was working with Holman Hunt, and more than twenty years elapsed before the foreground with its dancing figures and women playing stringed instruments was added. In the years that intervened the painter had perfected his types.







The Charm of Rossetti

in Paradise. It is agreed on all sides that *His Art*. none of these subsequent efforts has the quality of the original oil painting which was commissioned by Lord Mount-Temple and is now to be seen in the Tate Gallery at Millbank. The choice between the mystical "Beata Beatrix," the mediæval "Dante's Dream," with its glimpses of the city of Florence in the background, is hard to determine, because each mood seems to find the artist fully equipped and, though the difficulties of "Dante's Dream" were very many and the composition hardly shows him in the light of a very great artist, the colouring is extraordinarily brilliant and effective, and the spirit of mediævalism is felt sincerely throughout. "The Bower Meadow," the remaining picture reproduced here, is one of the earliest of his notable works as far as the landscape background work is concerned, for this is clearly a remnant of the brave days

The Charm of

His Art. when he was a Pre-Raphaelite working with Millais and Holman Hunt. But the completion of the picture and the familiar strumous-lipped figures in the foreground were added more than twenty years afterwards. The studies for these figures are still preserved.

Conjecture is not a very reliable source of criticism though it plays a big part in its making. In the case of Rossetti it is hard to decide why he devoted so much time either to the production of single-figure pictures, or to the reproduction of the most successful ones. There are two ways of looking at the question. His harsher critics will tell us that he painted single figures because they gave less trouble, and were readily saleable, and that the copying of works that had already achieved renown, such as the "Beata Beatrix," for example, was due to no more worthy purpose than the

Rossetti

accumulation of money. But who can tell *His Art*. whether this sordid view might be adopted with safety even were it more attractive? It is admitted on every hand by those who knew and loved the man, and yet were perfectly honest in their regard, that he pursued beauty all the days of his life, and whether he had ventured up into the clouds, or down into the mire, the pursuit was constant. This being so, may we not hold that he painted single-figure pictures of the three-quarter length kind in order to perpetuate the type of beauty that was to him the supreme type, and that, if he copied successful pictures, it was because he felt that they came nearest to the expression of what was in his heart and brain? It has been suggested in these pages that he had the true Florentine spirit, and this belief is strengthened when we reflect upon the countless experiments in which he indulged,

The Charm of

His Art. for the Florentines of the Renaissance were men who sought to exhaust the limits of human knowledge. Deliberately their painters took all art to be their province, while some of them, like Leonardo da Vinci and Michael Angelo, travelled quite happily from one art to another. Rossetti himself was insatiable. He experimented in poetry ; he experimented in art. He wandered from chalk drawings to stained-glass windows, and it is hard to say that he failed in any direction. Indeed, when he was associated with the firm of Morris & Company, his designs for stained-glass windows, glazed tiles, and pulpit panels showed that he could at least adorn all he touched, and his work includes some illustrations for books in the form of wood engravings.

Of his pictures there are many different kinds ; the Dante series stands by itself ;

Rossetti

the religious pictures form a class, so do *His Art*. the mediæval ones, so do the symbolical ones. Then there are the Genre pictures, of which "Found" is the best remembered. Nor must we forget the cartoons and woodcuts that were additional examples of the man's boundless inspired and inspiring energy.

Concerning his ultimate place in the history of nineteenth-century art and poetry it is yet too early to write. But we cannot turn to his work without the profound consciousness that there were years when the leaders of thought of his own time, the lights of art and letters, were content to sit at his feet. The greatest among them cut themselves adrift after a few years, not because of any direct quarrel, but rather because they found that the brilliant intellect was dominating them to the loss of their own individuality. They feared lest they should become mere echoes of the strongest

The Charm of

His Art. personality of their time. Had he been educated as Coleridge was educated, and had his mind developed the metaphysical bent of the author of "The Ancient Mariner," there would have been a still more marked resemblance between the two men in several aspects. Each possessed talent that was nearly akin to genius. Each was of a certain indolent disposition. Each could disarm the most actively hostile stranger or acquaintance if but allowed to speak. Then, too, each passed away under a cloud, having suffered for years through more or less secret devotion to a pernicious drug after having done the best work in the earlier season. It is in the personality that comparison becomes most reasonable. The greatest of their contemporaries sat at the feet of Samuel Taylor Coleridge and Dante Gabriel Rossetti, while those who have to deal with them to-day, even for the sake of paying

Rossetti

the small tribute of admiration to the de- *His Art.*
parted, find themselves in no little difficulty
when they attempt to sum up the forces
which made for greatness and for weakness,
and for a promise no subsequent achieve-
ment was destined to redeem. It seems
likely that Rossetti's greatest influence was
upon his own generation. It was more than
the influence of work ; it was preserved and
sustained by associations. A few favoured
disciples were admitted to the sanctum, and
they carried the glad tidings to the rank
and file.

Thirty years have passed now since
Rossetti laid aside the brush and the pen,
and although in the latter years he employed
assistants in his studio, the mantle of Elijah
has not fallen. In these thirty years we
have found no man who paints as Rossetti
painted, or writes as he wrote. Nor should
we welcome one, for the result could be

The Charm of Rossetti

His Art. no more than ineffective imitation. Rossetti's art was intensely personal, whether with pen or with palette he did little more than express himself,—his own visions, his own strivings. Had he lived to a mature age and kept his health he might have placed himself at the head of a great movement, but he would not have been the founder of a school. The one experience was probably all-sufficing. It has been said that we do not know the place of this most poetic of painters and most pictorial of poets. But one thing at least we do recognise, and that is, the abundant and never failing interest of his work, no matter the direction in which he was seeking success.







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